

1. FROM VAL DI RANCO TO PIAN DELLE MACINARE

“The beech groves and karst plains of the Upper Valley of Rio Freddo”

(TRAILS N. 225 - 242 - 229)

Length: 8 km, circular walk

Difference in elevation: 300 m

Time: 5 hours

Difficulty: E

Drinking water available: yes (Val di Ranco, Fonte Acqua Fredda)

Note: we advise you not to take this route during the thaw and rainy periods due to problems crossing the Rio Freddo.

The route begins in the village of Val di Ranco (1050 m), easily reached from Sigillo via the paved road that leaves the Flaminia. It's best to park near the “Monte Cucco di Tobia” Hotel Bar Restaurant and take the path just below where Trail 225 begins. This runs through the wonderful beech grove named “Mother of the Beech Trees,” where impressive, centuries-old beeches with their characteristic, majestic roots are the undisputed lords. After about 30 minutes of gentle walking through the beech grove, you'll come to the “Fonte dell'Acqua Fredda” fountain (1015 m). Tourists can drink the refreshing spring water before it is channeled into a tiny stream. Trail 225 continues into the Fida forest of high trees, carpeted with fragrant wild garlic (*Allium ursinum*), which releases a characteristic scent in spring that fills the entire area.

Walking in these woods, often alongside examples of centuries-old beech trees, means taking a plunge into an almost magical world, interspersed with light and shade created by the thick foliage of the trees. Further on, the beech grove gradually gives way to bushes of blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*), field rose (*Rosa*



Tall beech forest



Wild garlic

arvensis), mixed with a few examples of yew (*Taxus baccata*) and alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), rather rare for this area.

At a certain point you'll come to a fork between Trails 225 and 242. Continue along Trail 225 as it begins to rise in the midst of cool beech woods. After climbing up a rather rough stretch, the rocky walls of the “Passo del Lupo” (Wolf's Pass) that are also used as a training wall for rock climbing appear on your left (1145 m). Opposite, a small flat space opens up from the other side of the trail, beyond which the rock face of Mt. Cucco overhangs the gorge of Rio Freddo. This is a very beautiful, panoramic viewpoint, overlooking the harshest, wildest part of the Park, hemmed in between Mt. Strega to the northeast, Mt. Catria to the north, Mt. Motette and Mt. Le Gronde to the



Secular beech roots

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northwest, with Mt. Nerone on the horizon.



Val di Ranco in autumn

Trail 225 continues from this point until it soon opens on to the far-reaching meadow of Pian delle Macinare (1150 m), a depression of karst origin, from which various circular, cross country skiing routes begin. The entire plain is covered in herbaceous plants, which flower abundantly in spring and summer. The picnic tables and wonderful panorama make this an ideal place to stop and have something to eat and drink. Here



Snowdrop and crocus

you'll also find the Mainardi refuge, where you can get something to eat (check the seasonal opening times before you leave). The building, like the entire surrounding territory, belongs to the "Native Men of Costacciaro" Agricultural Society (see insert at the bottom of Route 5).

Turn back along Trail 225, then take Trail 242



Orchid Ophrys

on the left, which leaves behind the imposing massif of Mt. Cucco and the cool, humid beech grove. It continues until it meets Trail 229. If you take this trail to the left, in 30 minutes you reach the Rio Freddo gorge (see insert), otherwise bear right and walk along the Rio Freddo to return to your starting point. The surroundings are cool and relaxing: the shady beech trees blend with the water as it flows slowly over a winding, stony bed, and

occasionally creates tiny waterfalls.

The route is wonderful at all times of the year: in spring, the first to flower are the alpine squill (*Scilla bifolia*), snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*), crocuses (*Crocus vernus*), primroses, violets and cyclamens, followed by orchids and anemones, to create marvelous patches of color where the forest thins out and allows a little more light to come through. In summer, the cool, majestic beech grove allows you to walk the route even during the hottest hours of the day and offers a place to relax and find peace in sublime contact with nature. In autumn, the changing colors of the various species in the wood range from yellow to red and gold, in stark contrast against the dark green of evergreen plants, such as the yew and holly, and create a unique, indescribable sight. Lastly, in winter, you can walk the entire route on a beautiful sunny day, even better if it has just snowed, when you can go looking for animal footprints or admire the spectacular hoarfrost.

The Rio Freddo gorge

This is one of Italy's most beautiful and most impressive gorges, which can be reached from Val Di Ranco in less than an hour via footpath 229 as far as Passo Porraia, where you branch off on to the 275. Descent into this almost magical place is possible if you are suitably equipped and accompanied by an expert guide. Here, the water has molded the rocks into bizarre, peculiar shapes and created waterfalls and pools of unforgettable beauty. This is the home of the auricula (*Primula auricola*) and the spectacled salamander (*Salamandrina terdigitata*), proof of a pure, unpolluted environment. The entire Rio Freddo gorge is an SCI (Site of Community Importance) and one of the most precious naturalist areas of the entire Park.

To descend, please contact qualified cave guides.